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## **Varsity Vs. Club Sports; Does Legitimacy Make A Difference?**

### **Problem**

When people think of college or debate what university they want to attend, sports are often an important factor. Athletics play a significant part in the lives of the majority of college students in the present time. Whether a student is a member of a sports team or just watching a game with friends, it provides them with an opportunity to bond with other students and feel more connected to the college community. There are a myriad of students who would love to be a member of a sports team during their college experience. Being part of a team doesn't just allow a student to bond and form friendships with their team members, it also keeps them in shape and allows the student to have a sense of internal motivation. The problem with so many students wanting to be an athlete is there are only a certain number of positions open on varsity sports teams. This is where club sports come into effect. Club sports provide students with the opportunity to play a sport and be a part of a team without having to be on a varsity level. There are many similarities as well as differences between college varsity sports and club sports. In this paper I will compare and contrast club sports and varsity sports using data I collected from interviews and personal observations. I will then take the data I collected and use it to draw conclusions on how sports tie into the college culture and the meaning of education.

### **Background**

In a national study of student athletes conducted by Josephine R. Potuto and James O'Hanlon (1993)<sup>[1]</sup>, they interviewed college varsity athletes to see how their athletic experiences affect their college life<sup>[2]</sup>. Only 66% of the varsity team members interviewed said that they feel their coach thinks it is very important for them to graduate. The other 34% responded that their coach finds it either somewhat important or not important for the members to graduate. The interviews also found that a quarter of the students interviewed would not have attended college if they didn't get an athletic scholarship. Another question asked in the interview was whether student athletes considered themselves more of a student or more of an athlete. The researchers found that 60% of the students interviewed considered themselves an athlete over a student<sup>[3]</sup>.

Varsity sports are super competitive and very official with their games. The fact that a numerous amount of student athletes feel that their coach doesn't care if their members graduate or not shows how important the sport is to the coach. Often times the coaches don't take into consideration that their members are also college students with other work to do. They are mainly focused on making their athletes the best at their sport and winning as many games as possible to move on to further competitive levels.

Athletic scholarships also show how significant varsity sports are to colleges and universities. These scholarships are awarded when a university sees a student play and wants them on their team so badly, they are willing to pay for their whole tuition. Oftentimes, student athletes would not be able to afford to go to the college of their choice without an athletic scholarship.

The fact that 60% of student athletes think of themselves as an athlete more than a student shows how meaningful the sport is to them. Many athletes have to form their schedules around their games and practices and have to find a good balance between their athletics and school work. Since many students would not be at the university they play for if they did not receive a scholarship, it is easy to see how they view themselves as more of an athlete.

This research proves varsity-member students are educated in many ways. First off, finding a good balance between academics and athletics can be extremely hard. Being able to manage their time between classes, practices, homework, and games is an intelligent skill that most students don't possess. Many athletes use their sport as an internal motivator to stay enrolled and excel in their academic work. Some athletes wouldn't have attended college at all if it weren't for the sport they play. Finding these alternate reasons to stay at college manifests the education of the students. When student athletes keep up with their school work, it shows their intelligence of knowing how to keep their priorities straight especially since the majority think their coach isn't very supportive of their academic achievement<sup>[4]</sup>.

In contrast to varsity athletics, club sports can be defined as sports that contain teams of non-varsity level players who still compete with teams from other universities. Club teams often do not require tryouts and accept anyone who wants to play. Since mostly everyone who wants to join the team is accepted, club teams are generally larger than typical sports teams. Club teams don't normally have a regular coach; instead they are lead by an upperclassmen student or an alumni of the college. Since club sports are student-run and not necessarily a part of the university, they have to manage everything on their own. Uniforms, transportation, practice space, etc. are all the responsibility of each of the members since nothing is really provided for the teams from the university. Club teams only compete a few times per semester and are not registered through the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

Reading this study got me to wonder if college club team members feel the same way. Do they think of themselves as more of a student or more of an athlete? Do they think their coaches care more about winning than them successfully graduating? Do they attend a college because of the club sports teams they have? Would they choose to put athletics above their academics in their priorities?

## **Method**

To answer the proposed questions above, I used ethnographic research approaches such as interviews and observations. I wanted answers to my questions directly from the studied source so I interviewed a few students from both varsity sports teams and club sports teams. I am a member of the club ultimate frisbee team, so I had a great opportunity to observe the club sport aspect from the inside. I also attended a varsity football game and a varsity soccer game to observe the way they play and the way their coaches interact with them during a game. From my

interviews and observations, I gained a great deal of knowledge on the way club and varsity sports differ and also how they are similar.

## Findings

In general, I found that college varsity sport are indeed more intense than club sports. I interviewed members of club sports teams and asked them the same questions the national study asked varsity member students so I could compare them<sup>[5]</sup>.

The first club athlete I interviewed said, since the captain of the team is a student himself, she feels like he wants the members to graduate more than he wants them to play. If she ever has homework to do or has to study, the captain would rather have her do what she needs to get done than come to practice and not do her school work. Sports had little effect on her choice to attend Bloomsburg. She did not even know she would join a team until she started school so it's definitely not the reason she came to school here. She would consider herself a student more than an athlete. She said she would only really consider herself an athlete if she was on a varsity team.

The second club athlete I interviewed with the same questions as the first one responded that there is no coach for her team since it is a club sport, but they do have a captain. She believes he wants the members to focus on their school work and balance it out with practices. They are not required to go to every single practice, they just go whenever they can. She thought about playing on the varsity soccer team when she came to Bloomsburg, but she didn't have enough time in her schedule for it. She still wanted to play a sport, so she joined the club ultimate frisbee team. She did not even know there was such a team, so it did not influence her decision to attend Bloomsburg. She would consider herself a student because that's what she's paying for. She said she came to school to learn and be a student, she's only an athlete on the side<sup>[6]</sup>.

These two club athletes made it very clear that there are many differences between the mentality of varsity and club sports members. Their answers basically opposed all the findings in the national study of varsity student athletes. It seems the fact that the club team is student-run and has no official coach makes academics a more important topic in the eyes of the players. The practices aren't as strict and attendance isn't necessarily mandatory which puts a lot less stress on the schedules of the team members. However, making the right choices on whether to go to practice or whether to stay home and catch up on school work demonstrates education. Club student athletes have to make educated decisions based on their priorities and time management skills. For the members who wanted to play a varsity sport but couldn't, finding an alternative solutions shows their high level of intelligence<sup>[7]</sup>.

While observing varsity and club games, I realized that even though they seem very similar, the games differed in many ways<sup>[8]</sup>. First off, club sports don't normally have referees like varsity sports do. In a club sport, the players call fouls for themselves and they either agree or contest on their own. If there is a foul on the play and the player doesn't call it, nothing is done and it goes unnoticed. While watching varsity sports games, I noticed the coach yells a lot during the actual game. The coach is constantly telling the players where they should be and what they should be doing. Since there is no real coach for a club team, there isn't a lot of direction going

on. I asked a club team member about this and she said that the captain doesn't yell out much during the game, instead they talk about what they could improve either after the game or at their practices. In both kinds of games the players are still motivated and competitive throughout the whole game. Although club members don't compete as part of the NCAA, winning is still important to them and they still want to do the best they can to win<sub>[9]</sub>.

These observations coincide with the national study findings about how members of the teams view their coaches. Varsity members said they felt their coaches cared more about winning than anything else and club members said that while their captain also cares about winning, their main concern is the individual members. When seeing the varsity coaches yelling at the players and getting so upset when a member would make a mistake, it was clear to me that the coach was focused on winning the game and that was all. The fact that after a club game, everyone sits down together and has a casual talk with the captain about what they did right and what they can improve shows how the captain cares about each individual's skills and involvement<sub>[10]</sub>.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the data I collected through my interviews and observations, I can see that club sports and varsity sport actually are different. However, club sports are a good alternative to varsity sports if a student wants to play a sport, but doesn't have enough time or skill to commit to a varsity one. Club sports are competitive while allowing more flexible practices and less strict commitment.

These findings say a lot about college culture to me. If a student really wants to be a part of something, it's nice to know they can keep their options open. To me, college is all about freedom and being on your own. It's the first step to being in the real world by yourself and having to figure everything out individually. In college, students have a choice over basically everything they do. They can chose what classes they take, when and where they eat, what they do in their free time, and the list goes on. That being said, club sports offer a student the ability to be on a sports team that fits their schedule. They can work practices, games and tournaments into their daily schedules easily since they are not strongly required. They can choose which practices to go to and which ones would be more beneficial to miss.

In my opinion, choosing to play on a club sports team if one can't be on a varsity team shows a lot of intelligence. It is a very educated decision to continue to play and compete even if it's not on an official NCAA run team. Being able to find a balance between athletics and academics is an intelligent skill mastered by both varsity and club team members. A sports team member makes the educated decision to join a team for inner motivation. Many student athletes use their sport to motivate them through their college experience. They look forward to practices because they get to do what they love with people they love to be around. Being able to find the right activities to fit your needs and making yourself happy with how you spend your free time is a display of an educated college student.